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ABSTRACT

In the last 20 years, social science researchers have used a variety of methods to investigate the Asian Indian sub-culture in the United States. A national mail survey of over 200 Asian Indians uncovered a number of facts. The income, education, home ownership, and occupational profile of the sample projected an affluent image of the Asian Indian community. Only a minority of respondents had experienced discrimination and only 25% were supportive of the concept of a "protected class status" for Asian Indians. A majority had definite ideas about the public policy priorities of the American and Indian Governments and were very knowledgeable about pro- and anti-Indian politicians. Many Asian Indians are troubled by the image of India in the Western media, and have to rely on the weekly Asian Indian community papers to know what is happening on the Indian sub-continent. Also, while the Asian Indian community is, in general, well-educated and affluent, there is an emerging need for support services. Other areas of concern include the status of women, the immigration laws, the quest for harmony between Sikhs and Hindus, employment discrimination (especially within the medical profession), the difficulty of obtaining religious education for Hindu youth, and the elderly. Some of these needs are being addressed by the growing number of Asian Indian organizations, but many issues deserve a closer study from a scholarly perspective. (KH)

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# An Occasional Paper Series

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## THE ASIAN INDIANS AND THE AMERICAN CHALLENGE

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# THE ASIAN INDIANS AND THE AMERICAN CHALLENGE

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A discussion paper prepared for presentation at the Symposia and Festivals on India at the Third World House, Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, April 15, 1985

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. Census Bureau for the first time introduced the racial category "Asian Indian" in its 1980 Census forms. We Asian Indians in the United States, owe this to the intensive lobbying efforts of Dr. Manoranjan Datta of the Association of Indians in America (AIA). The prior U.S. censuses had counted the Indians as Caucasians and as such any definitive statistical data about the Indian community were not easily available. The U.S. Census of 1980 tells us that there were 387,223 persons who had described themselves as Indians on the census forms. In that year it was also estimated that only 24% of the Asian Indian immigrants had acquired U.S. citizenship through naturalization. Let me hasten to add that this number included persons who had also included 21 other types of written entries in the census forms. These diverse self-descriptions might make one wonder whether most people of Indian origin in the United states would like to be known as "Asian Indians" only to help the statistical tabulations by the U.S. Census bureaucracy! For the purpose of this presentation, however, we will equate the term "Asian Indian" with the people of India who have chosen to make America their home country.

The purpose of my presentation this evening is to discuss with you some salient features of the Asian Indian sub-culture

TABLE 1
DISTRIBUTION OF ASIAN INDIANS, POPULATION IN SCSA'S

(1980 Census Estimates)

| SCSAs | Asian Indian Population |
|---|---|
| Boston | 6,548 |
| Chicago | 34,073 |
| Cincinnati | 1,935 |
| Cleveland | 5,512 |
| Dayton | 1,133 |
| Houston | 11,656 |
| Indianapolis | 1,328 |
| Los Angeles | 26,535 |
| Miami | 4,891 |
| Milwaukee | 1,744 |
| New York | 83,998 |
| Philadelphia | 13,309 |
| Providence | 1,105 |
| San Francisco | 19,011 |
| Seattle | 2,757 |

in the United States and to highlight some contemporary issues that the Asian Indians are dealing with. There is a sizeable social science literature on the overseas Indian communities around the world. Some of these relate to the Asian Indians in the United States. In the last 20 years a number of newspapers, magazines, newsletters, conference proceedings, working papers and reports have been published within the Asian Indian Communities in the United States. These are excellent sources of information about the Asian Indian sub-culture. Those of us who are in the business of social science survey research would occasionally come across some attitudes surveys of the Asian Indians. Several young researchers in the field of Sociology, Anthropology, Education, and Psychology have studied about the Asian Indians. Their works have involved a wide variety of social science methods including mail surveys, personal interviews with purposive sample of local Indians, participant observation, content analysis of news items in Asian Indian printed media, and documentary research. Collectively, all their works have created a body of knowledge about the Asian Indian community in the United States. Some eight years ago, I was involved in a project involving a national mail survey of Asian Indians utilizing the mailing list in a biographical directory. Slightly over 200 Asian Indians returned a 96 item mail questionnaire in this survey. This survey data had some information about the political attitudes, public policy concerns and background attributes of the survey respondents who, I believe, were fairly representative of the population of Asian Indians in which they were included at that time.

ATTRIBUTES, ATTITUDES, AND ORIENTATIONS TOWARD PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES AMONG THE ASIAN INDIANS

Four Indian newspapers in the United States highlighted the findings of that survey in 1977. These were the things that these papers said.

Survey of Indians in the U.S.: Indian, Rich Homeowner (India Express)

Survey finds Little Bias (India Abroad)

Indians in U.S. show serious interest in Indian Affairs (India West)

Indians in America: The need for Community Oriented Research (India Times)

These journalistic efforts to provide a capsule summary of the results of a 96 item survey questionnaire may be one way of summarizing what was found out about the Asian Indian sub-culture at that time.

First, the income, education, homeownership and occupational profile of this sample projected an affluent image of the Asian Indian Community. Some Asian Indians were uncomfortable about this image. With the advent of 1980 U.S. Census findings Asian Indians seem to have the highest income among any other single ethnic group in the U.S. (8% of the Asian Indians are physicians according to American Association of Physicians of India).

Second, only a minority of the survey respondents had experienced discrimination in diverse situations and only 25% were supportive of the concept of a "protected class status" for the Indians in the U.S. Some had written in cryptic comments on the survey forms against such a status such as "we do not want to be a scheduled caste in the U.S."

Third, most survey participants had very definitive ideas about the public policy priorities of the Government of India. They were also interested in the happenings in India.

Fourth, the survey respondents had definitive views on public policy priorities in the U.S. and were very knowledgable about the pro and anti-Indian U.S. political figures.

These survey findings seemed interesting to several scholars in Britain, India, and Canada who had an interest in the study of "The Oversears Indian Communities."

(III)

ISSUES IN THE CONTEMPORARY ASIAN INDIAN COMMUNITIES

The Asian Indian community is widely distributed in the U.S. The attitudes, values, opinions of the members of this community do not appear in Gallup Polls or Roper Polls. One has to look at obscure journal articles, newly completed doctoral dissertations, working papers, impressionistic writings, journalistic assertions and a systematic reading of the Asian Indian publications is the U.S. to assess these dimensions. What follows is as an attempt to categorize the varied concerns of the Asian Indians in present day America. There are many issues in the contemporary Asian India sub-culture in the United States. Some of these problems are not unique to the Asian Indian community and may be shared by the other immigrant groups in the U.S. We shall list a few of these for discussion purposes without signifying their priority over the others.

IMAGE OF INDIA IN THE U.S. AND ELSWHERE IN THE WEST

Many Asian Indians are concerned about the image of India in the western media. On an average day a typical American newspaper, radio, and television program has no news about India, its people, or its leaders. Bhopal, Sikhs, Indira Assassination and Rajneeshpuram may have caught the headlines of the American media, but the Asian Indians are not too sure whether these have projected a positive image of their country of origin. An Asian Indian interested in news about India has to rely upon the weekly papers published in their community to know about what is happening in that vast sub-continent.

Even a very impressionistic content analysis of the Asian Indian newspapers in the U.S. would suggest that the domestic issues and concerns of India have a dominant share of column inches in these papers. The editorals, the essays, letters to the editor, and new items deal with the political and social developments in India.

Most affluent Asian Indians undertake extensive travel between India-U.S. for business or vacation. The other forms of Asian Indian interactions with India take the form of trade, commerce, scholarly works, conferences and so on. The Asian Indians hope for a Pro-Indian foreign policy by the U.S. government and a Pro-U.S. foreign policy by the policy makers in New Delhi. Unfortunate events in India including the massacre of Sikhs in Delhi and gas leak in Bhopal bother the Asian Indians. The news about Regime changes in the state capitals and in New Delhi continues to be of interest to the community.

## CHANGING SOCIAL PROFILE OF THE COMMUNITY

The social profile of the Asian Indian Community is undergoing significant changes. The new Indian immigrants since 1965 tended to be well educated professionals including doctors, engineers, college professors, and scientists. A more pluralistic broad-based immigration base may be emerging as a result of marriages sponsorships of relatives. There are reasons to believe that at least in the metropolises where most Asian Indians live there is an emerging need for support services at least for a segment of the Asian Indian population. Some of these people may even be handicapped by lack of knowledge in English language.

## ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE OF THE ASIAN INDIANS

A plethora of Asian Indian organizations have appeared on the American scene. At the national level these include the India League (IL), Association of Indians in America (AIA), the National Association of Americans of Asian Indian Descent (NAAAID), and the Federation of Indian Associations. These groups organize annual conventions in the major metropolitan areas. Some of these groups have attempted linkages with the American Political system. At the 1984 convention of NAAAID for example 18 Reagan Administration officials were on the program addressing issues such as Civil Rights, Minority Business program, Licensing system for the foreign medical graduates and the procurement procedures from small businesses by the USDA.

AID, HHS, NASA, DOD, DOL, EPA, and NRC. This organization also conducts entrepreneural development programs for Asian Indian businessmen. There exists an Asian Indian Caucus in the Democratic Party. The 1984 San Francisco Convention of the party had several Asian Indian delegates and alternates.

The same convention also had major congressional leaders as the speaker in various panels. Then there are a number of national groups organized on linguistic and regional basis including the Sikh Forum, Telugu Conference, Orissa Society, Bihar Association, and the others.

AIA had launched a major voter registration drive before the 1984 general election to register non-registered Asian Indian U.S. citizens as voters and to encourage resident aliens to apply for U.S. citizenship.

## ASIAN INDIAN WOMEN

A new Asian Indian working woman has emerged in the American scene. These include non-professionals such as typists, secretaries, receptionists, sales girls, factory workers, clerks, housekeeper, cafeteria workers, etc. According to an Indian psychologist these women lack both self-confidence and self-esteem. Many of them are not fluent in English and have communication problems. They even lack the moral support of husbands and families. They are underemployed in terms of pay and salary level. The biggest problem of the single working Asian Indian woman is loneliness. Because of cultural patterns they do not like to date but resent arranged marriages. They lead a very lonely life.

Asian Indian women have begun talking about the problems of spouse abuse, child abuse, and acquaintance rape. A spouse abuse center in Los Angeles has recently hired an Asian Indian counselor to serve the needs of women from India. Some Asian Indian women are also speaking out against "immigration dowry" which involves attracting a bridegrooms from India for an Indian bride in the U.S. whose citizenship or permanent resident status could assure immigration for the bridegroom.

## IMMIGRATION

The immigration laws are a major concern in the Asian Indian sub-culture. They are concerned about any changes in the laws that would stop family reunification dimension under the existing system. They are not overly concerned about any amnesty provisions in the proposed immigration bills since very few of them are illegal aliens. The number of immigration lawyers of Indian origin and the Amerian lawyers providing legal services to the Asian Indian community are growing as indicated by the frequency of their advertisements in the Asian Indian news media.

## RECONCILIATION WITH SIKHS

A major concern in the Asian Indian community today is the quest of harmony between the Sikhs and the Hindus. Following the entry of the Indian military into the Golden Temple and the massacre of poor Sikhs in Delhi in the riot that followed Mrs. Indira Gandhi's assassination, the Asian Indian community has seen an precedented split between the Sikhs and the Hindus.

The radical Sikh organizations have utilized the Asian Indian media to high light their concerns. Both Hindu and Sikh organizations have emerged to make efforts toward reconciliation and unity.

## DISCRIMINATION AND ASIAN INDIANS

Discrimination is an issue in the Asian Indian community. An umbrella organization of Asian Indian doctors known as American Association of Physicians of India (AAPI) has been formed. According to this group Indian doctors account for 25% of all foreign medical graduates in the U.S. and 5% of all U.S. physicians. They constitute about 8% of the Asian Indian population in the U.S.

They are concerned about the declining number of residencies available for foreign medical graduates and other situations involving employment discrimination. Another group known as the Association of Indian Urologists in North America has voiced similar concerns with the American Medical Association (AMA).

Some cases of Asian Indians suing their employers for employment discrimination or filing discrimination charges with EEOC have appeared in the Asian Indian newspapers.

## ASIAN INDIAN YOUTH CULTURE

The U.S. born Asian Indian children are growing up. Some of them have never visited India. Many of them are asking questions about the values and perceptions of their first generation immigrant parents. Hindu Asian Indians, especially

those who are located in remote rural areas find it virtually impossible to provide minimal religious education to their teenage children. Some Hindu temples have come up in metropolises with sizeable Indian populations to meet these needs to some extent. Asian Indian youth also continue to face the other issues like most American teenagers which is further complicated by their socialization in the two cultures.

## THE ASIAN INDIAN ELDERLY

The young Asian Indian professionals of the sixties are graying. The next decade will bring into the community the issues of the elderly. Some of these people think of returning to India in old age. Some Indian businesses are translating their dreams of the Asian Indians elderly by developing colonies for the "foreign network" in New Delhi and elsewhere. It may be interesting to see the cultural patterns in these colonies to be built on the foundation of "foreign exchange". Those who decide not to return to India but gracefully age in this country may face newer challenges.

## CONCLUSIONS

We have summarized some dimensions of the Asian Indian sub-culture in the United States. These features of this community may be comparable to that of many other immigrant groups in this nation of immigrants. The Asian Indian community in the United States is becoming more Americanized in terms of issues and concerns that face these people. Yet some problems and issues of the Asian Indian Community deserve a closer study from a scholarly perspective.

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